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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following letter was written by Rosita Shehirlian, of the Methodist mission at Ancoraimes, Bolivia.

EVANGELISM AMONG THE INDIOS

The Methodist Church at Ancoraimes, on the Bolivian plateau, had about 150 members in 1956; that is the average number of those attending the Sunday services. These Indios come from different places; many of them have four hours walk to church and four hours' walk home again. The Indios have a very hard life here. They work in the fields with the most primitive methods and are always hoping for rain, for water is very scarce. They know nothing about artificial fertilisers or the control of pests, so the harvests are poor in spite of all the hard work done. Until four years ago the Indios were treated practically as slaves, and even today they are regarded as little more than animals. Their only amusement is getting drunk, for which there are opportunities at baptisms, weddings and funerals, and also at Catholic festivals which occur nearly every day, for every village celebrates the day of its local saint in addition to the other church festivals. Men, women and children drink pure spirits, until they are in an indescribabl condition. They know nothing about the love of God. Their church has only taught them to fear God more and more, and so they make sacrifices to Him (as they used to do to their pagan gods) with dancing, drinking and the fruits of the soil. They are superstitious and cling to their old customs. Constantly oppressed by all kinds of fears, they live in their miserable huts in the greatest poverty and filth, people and animals together. Although they possess wonderful physical endurance, they are nevertheless full of disease, mainly owing to under-nourishment, lack of hygiene and ignorance. In our district tuberculosis rages. The infant mortality is immeasurable.

What is the Protestant Church doing to improve this situation? It knows that nothing can illumine their life except the Gospel. So it tries to approach them with spiritual care, education, and agricultural and medical assistance.

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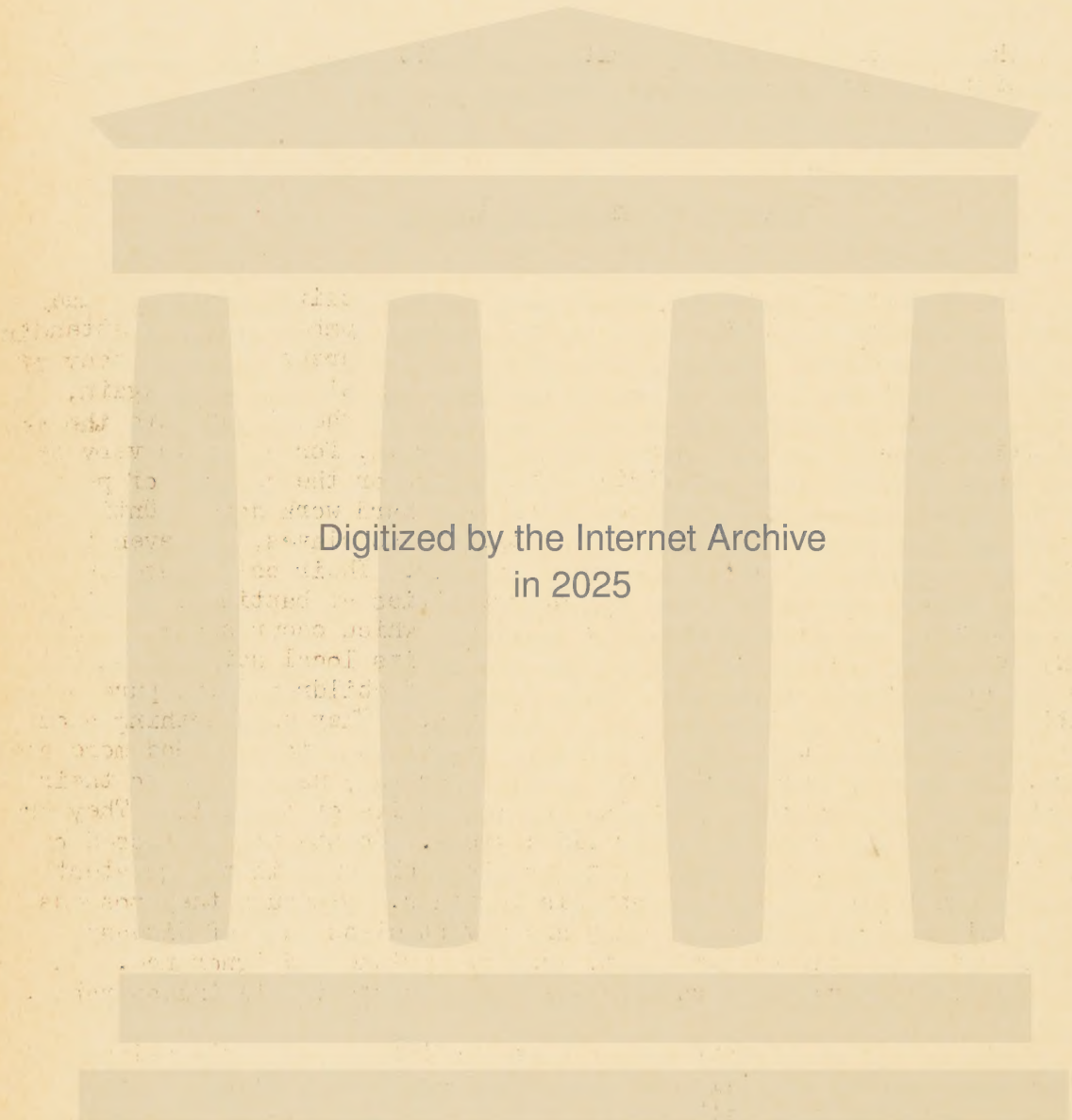

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We have a foreign evangelist here, but unfortunately he cannot speak Aymará. However, the laity do a good deal of work; they visit the people in their homes and go about preaching. It makes far more impression on the Indios if one of their own people bears testimony to the Christian faith, for in their heart of hearts they are still suspicious of white people.

It is wonderful to see the difference in the homes and the lives of the Indios after their conversion. They are cleaner, they want to learn and get on, they stop drinking (which appeared impossible) and they really suffer, because the others (who go on drinking) will not let them alone. It is the custom to drink, to invite others to drink, and always to accept the invitation.

For education we have one main school in Ancoraimes, with Bolivian teachers, and from it teachers go out to the local schools. The teachers are Indios who have attended the elementary school and who then pass on what they have learned, as well as they can. The schools cannot be described as model schools, but they do teach the people to read; without them many children would be illiterate. At present we have 15 schools. We have been asked to open others, but we prefer to improve those which already exist and we would rather open some more main schools. The teachers draw a small salary from the mission; the children's parents give them their meals. In all these schools instruction is given in the Christian faith, and many of them also hold services for the children.

We also have a boarding-school for Indio girls, to train them as Christian housewives. In addition to general education, they are trained in all kinds of domestic work. But we are very anxious for them to have a personal experience of Christ. We also have a vocational training school for young men, the principal purpose of which is to train them for preaching and teaching. The study of the Bible occupies the central place. But the pupils also receive manual instruction.

We have one Bolivian nurse who looks after the people who are ill in our district. There is no other nurse for miles around, nor any doctor. When she began work six years ago, it was very difficult, because the Indios mistrusted her and the medical methods of the white man. But today she is in great demand and has far too much to do. We are now expecting a doctor; a small clinic for first aid has already been built, and we are planning a modern clinic for all requirements.

We need more workers. The whole of Bolivia may be regarded as virgin soil that is waiting to receive the Gospel.

This letter appears also in the pamphlet, Evangelism in Latin America by Rudolf Obermüller (pp. 23), which gives further and more comprehensive information about the problems and progress of evangelism in Latin America. Available in English from the World Council of Churches, Department on Evangelism, 17 route de Malagnou, Geneva, Switzerland, at Fr 1.20.